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AGAINST THE MIXING OF TRADITIONAL FORMS

According to Hindu tradition, there are two opposed ways, one inferior and the other superior, of being outside the castes: one can be "without caste" (avarna), in the privative sense, that is to say below them; and one can, on the contrary, be "beyond the castes" (ativarna) or above them, although this second case is incomparably rarer than the first, especially under the conditions of the present age.

In an analogous manner, one can also be on this side of or beyond traditional forms: the "irreligious" man, for example, such as is commonly encountered in the modern Western world, is unquestionably in the first case; the second, on the contrary, applies exclusively to those who have effectively become conscious of the fundamental unity and identity of all traditions; and here again, this second case can at present only be very exceptional. It should moreover be well understood that, in speaking of effective consciousness, we mean by this that notions that are merely theoretical concerning this unity and this identity, although assuredly far from negligible, are altogether insufficient for someone to be able to consider that he has passed beyond the stage at which it is necessary to adhere to a determined form and to hold to it strictly.

This, of course, in no way means that one who is in this case should not at the same time strive to understand the other forms as completely and as profoundly as possible, but only that, practically, he must not make use of ritual or other means properly belonging to several different forms, which would be not only useless and vain, but even harmful and dangerous in various respects.

Traditional forms may be compared to paths that all lead to the same

goal, but which, as paths, are nonetheless distinct; it is evident that one cannot follow several of them at the same time, and that, once one has entered upon one of them, it is appropriate to follow it to the end without departing from it, for wishing to pass from one to another would be the surest way not to advance in reality, if not even to risk going completely astray.

Only he who has reached the end thereby dominates all the paths, and this because he no longer has to follow them; he may therefore, if need be, practice all the forms indiscriminately, but precisely because he has gone beyond them and because, for him, they are henceforth unified in their common principle. Generally, moreover, he will then continue outwardly to adhere to a defined form, if only by way of "example" for those who have not reached the same point as he; but if particular circumstances come to require it, he may just as well participate in other forms, since, from the point at which he stands, there is no longer between them any real difference.

Moreover, once these forms are thus unified for him, there can no longer in any way be any mixture or confusion therein, which necessarily presupposes the existence of diversity as such; and, once again, it is only a matter of him who is effectively beyond this diversity: the forms, for him, no longer have the character of paths or means, of which he has no further need, and they subsist only as expressions of the one Truth—expressions of which it is just as legitimate to make use according to circumstances as it is to speak different languages in order to make oneself understood by those whom one addresses.

There is therefore, in sum, between this case and that of an illegitimate mixing of traditional forms, the entire difference that we have indicated on other occasions, and in an entirely general manner, as being that between "synthesis" and "syncretism." Indeed, one who envisages all forms in the very unity of their principle, as we have just said, thereby has an essentially synthetic view of them, in the most rigorous sense of the word; he can place himself only equally within all of them, and even, we should say, at the point that is for all of them the most interior,

since it is truly their common center.

To return to the comparison we used earlier, all the paths, starting from different points, draw closer and closer together while nevertheless always remaining distinct, until they finally arrive at this unique center; but, seen from the center itself, they are no longer in reality anything but so many rays that emanate from it and by which it is in relation with the multiple points of the circumference. These two senses, inverse to one another, in which the same paths may be envisaged, correspond very exactly to the respective points of view of one who is "on the way" toward the center and of one who has arrived there, whose states, precisely, are often described in traditional symbolism as those of the "traveler" and of the "sedentary."

The latter is also comparable to one who, standing at the summit of a mountain, sees equally, and without having to move, its different slopes, whereas one who climbs this same mountain sees only the part nearest to him; and it is quite evident that the view of the first alone can be called synthetic.

On the other hand, one who is not at the center is necessarily always in a more or less "exterior" position, even with respect to his own traditional form, and all the more so with respect to others; if therefore he wishes, for example, to perform rites belonging to several different forms, claiming to use them concurrently as means or "supports" of his spiritual development, he can in reality only associate them thus "from the outside," which amounts to saying that what he does will be nothing other than "syncretism," since the latter consists precisely in such a mixing of disparate elements that nothing truly unifies.

Everything we have said elsewhere against "syncretism" in general therefore applies in this particular case, and even, one might say, with certain aggravations: as long as it is only a matter of theories, it can indeed, while being perfectly insignificant and illusory and representing only an effort expended in pure loss, still be relatively harmless; but here, through the direct contact that is implied with realities of a deeper

order, it risks entailing, for one who acts thus, a deviation or a stoppage of that interior development for which he believed, quite wrongly, that he was thereby procuring greater facilities.

Such a case is quite comparable to that of someone who, under the pretext of obtaining a cure more surely, would employ at the same time several medications whose effects would only neutralize and destroy one another, and which might even, at times, have between them unforeseen reactions more or less dangerous for the organism; there are things each of which is effective when one makes use of it separately, but which are nonetheless radically incompatible.

This brings us to specify yet another point: that, in addition to the properly doctrinal reason that opposes the validity of any mixing of traditional forms, there is a consideration which, while being of a more contingent order, is nonetheless very important from the point of view that one may call “technical.”

Indeed, supposing that someone finds himself in the required conditions to perform rites belonging to several forms in such a way that both the one and the other have real effects—which naturally implies that he has at least some effective ties with each of these forms—it may occur, and indeed will almost inevitably occur in most cases, that these rites will bring into action psychic influences which, not harmonizing with one another, will clash and provoke a state of disorder and imbalance affecting more or less seriously the one who will have imprudently aroused them; one readily understands that such a danger is one to which it is not appropriate to expose oneself inconsiderately.

The clash of psychic influences is moreover particularly to be feared, on the one hand, as a consequence of the most exterior rites, of those that belong to the exoteric side of different traditions, since it is evidently under this aspect especially that these present themselves as exclusive of one another, the divergence of the paths being all the greater the farther one considers them from the center; and, on the other hand, although this may seem paradoxical to one who does not reflect on it sufficiently,

the opposition is all the more violent the more common characteristics the traditions to which appeal is made possess, as, for example, in the case of those that exoterically assume the religious form, for things that are much more different enter into conflict with one another only with difficulty, by virtue of that very difference: there can be struggle only on the condition of placing oneself on the same terrain.

We prefer not to insist further on this, but we wish that this warning may suffice for those who would be tempted to put such discordant means into operation: let them not forget that the purely spiritual domain is the only one in which one is sheltered from all harm, because even oppositions no longer have any meaning there, and that, so long as the psychic domain has not been completely and definitively surpassed, the worst mishaps always remain possible, even—and we should perhaps say especially—for those who too resolutely make a profession of not believing in them.

THE TETRAKTYS AND THE SQUARE OF FOUR

In the course of our previous study, we were led, in connection with mathematical notation, to make an allusion to the Pythagorean Tetraktys, and we then indicated its numerical formula:
1 + 2 + 3 + 4 = 10,
showing the relation that directly unites the denary to the quaternary. One knows, moreover, the entirely particular importance attached to it by the Pythagoreans, which was expressed notably by the fact that they swore an oath "by the holy Tetraktys"; it has perhaps been less remarked that they also had another formula of oath, which was "by the square of four"; and there is between the two an evident relationship, for the number four is, one might say, their common base.

One could deduce from this, among other consequences, that Pythagorean doctrine must have presented itself with a character that was more "cosmological" than purely metaphysical, which is, moreover, not an exceptional case when one is dealing with Western traditions, since we have already had occasion to make an analogous remark concerning Hermeticism. The reason for this deduction, which may seem strange at first sight to one who is not accustomed to the use of numerical symbolism, is that the quaternary is everywhere and always considered as being properly the number of universal manifestation; it therefore marks, in this respect, the very point of departure of "cosmology", whereas the numbers that precede it, that is to say unity, the binary, and the ternary, relate strictly to "ontology"; the more particular emphasis placed on the quaternary thus corresponds indeed to that of the "cosmological" point of view itself.

At the beginning of the Rasā'il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā', the four terms of the fundamental quaternary are enumerated as follows:
1° the Principle, which is designated as al-Bāri', the "Creator" (which indicates that it is not a question of the Supreme Principle, but only of

Being, insofar as it is the first principle of manifestation, which moreover is indeed metaphysical Unity);
2° the Universal Spirit;
3° the Universal Soul;
4° primordial Hylē.

We shall not at present develop the different points of view from which these terms might be envisaged; one could in particular make them correspond respectively to the four "worlds" of Hebrew Kabbalah, which also have their exact equivalent in Islamic esoterism. What matters for the moment is that the quaternary thus constituted is regarded as presupposed by manifestation, in the sense that the presence of all its terms is necessary for the complete development of the possibilities that this manifestation comprises; and, it is added, this is why, in the order of manifested things, one always finds in a special manner the mark (one might say, in a way, the "signature") of the quaternary: hence, for example, the four elements (Ether not being counted here, since it is a question only of the "differentiated" elements), the four cardinal points (or the four regions of space corresponding to them, with the four "pillars" of the world), the four phases into which every cycle naturally divides (the ages of human life, the seasons in the annual cycle, the lunar phases in the monthly cycle, etc.), and so on; one could thus establish an indefinite multitude of applications of the quaternary, all of them moreover linked together by rigorous analogical correspondences, for they are, at bottom, only so many more or less special aspects of a single general "schema" of manifestation.

This "schema", in its geometric form, is one of the most widespread symbols, one of those that are truly common to all traditions: it is the circle divided into four equal parts by a cross formed by two rectangular diameters; and one may at once remark that this figure expresses precisely the relation of the quaternary and the denary, just as the formula we recalled at the beginning expresses it in numerical form. Indeed, the quaternary is represented geometrically by the square, if one envisages it under the "static" aspect, but under the "dynamic" aspect,

as is the case here, it is represented by the cross; the latter, when it turns around its center, generates the circumference, which, together with the center, represents the denary, which is, as we have said previously, the complete numerical cycle.

This is what is called the “circling of the quadrant”, the geometric representation of what the formula
1 + 2 + 3 + 4 = 10
expresses arithmetically; inversely, the Hermetic problem of the “squaring of the circle” (an expression so poorly understood ordinarily) is nothing other than what is represented by the quaternary division of the circle, supposed to be given first of all, by two rectangular diameters, and it will be expressed numerically by the same formula, but written in inverse sense:
10 = 1 + 2 + 3 + 4,
to show that the entire development of manifestation is thus brought back to the fundamental quaternary.

That being said, let us return to the relation between the Tetraktys and the square of four: the numbers 10 and 16 occupy the same rank, the fourth, respectively in the series of triangular numbers and in that of square numbers. One knows that triangular numbers are the numbers obtained by taking the sum of consecutive integers from unity up to each of the successive terms of the series; unity itself is the first triangular number, just as it is also the first square number, for, being the principle and origin of the series of integers, it must equally be so for all the other series that are thus derived from it.

The second triangular number is 1 + 2 = 3, which moreover shows that, as soon as unity has produced the binary by its own polarization, one immediately has the ternary thereby; and the geometric representation of this is evident: 1 corresponds to the apex of the triangle, 2 to the extremities of its base, and the triangle itself, taken as a whole, is naturally the figure of the number 3.

If one then considers the three terms of the ternary as having an

independent existence, their sum gives the third triangular number:
1 + 2 + 3 = 6;
this senary number being the double of the ternary, one may say that it implies a new ternary which is a reflection of the first, as in the well-known symbol of the “Seal of Solomon”; but this could give rise to other considerations that would lie outside our subject.

Continuing the series, one has, for the fourth triangular number,
1 + 2 + 3 + 4 = 10,
that is to say, the Tetraktys; and one sees thereby, as we have already explained, that the quaternary contains in a certain way all numbers, since it contains the denary; whence the formula of the Tao-te-Ching that we cited previously: “one produced two, two produced three, three produced all numbers,” which amounts again to saying that all manifestation is, as it were, enveloped in the quaternary, or, inversely, that the latter constitutes the complete base of its integral development.

The Tetraktys, insofar as it is a triangular number, was naturally represented by a symbol that was ternary in form as a whole, each of its outer sides comprising four elements; and this symbol was composed in all of ten elements, represented by as many points, nine of which were thus on the perimeter of the triangle and one at its center. One will remark that one finds again in this arrangement, despite the difference of geometric forms, the equivalent of what we have indicated concerning the representation of the denary by the circle, since there also 1 corresponds to the center and 9 to the circumference.

Let us also note in passing, in this connection, that it is because 9, and not 10, is the number of the “circumference”, that the division of the latter is normally carried out according to multiples of 9 (90 degrees for the quadrant, and consequently 360° for the entire circumference), which moreover is in direct relation with the whole question of “cyclic numbers”.

The square of four is, geometrically, a square whose sides comprise four elements, like those of the triangle of which we have just spoken; if one

considers the sides themselves as measured by the number of these elements, it results that the sides of the triangle and those of the square will be equal. One can then unite the two figures by making the base of the triangle coincide with the upper side of the square, as in the adjacent diagram (in which we have marked the points, for greater clarity, not on the sides themselves, but inside the figures, which makes it possible to count distinctly those that belong respectively to the triangle and to the square); and the ensemble thus obtained again gives rise to several important remarks.

First of all, if one considers only the triangle and the square as such, this ensemble is a geometric representation of the septenary, insofar as the latter is the sum of the ternary and the quaternary:
3 + 4 = 7;
one may say more precisely, according to the very disposition of the figure, that this septenary is formed by the union of a superior ternary and an inferior quaternary, which is susceptible of diverse applications.

For our part, confining ourselves to what concerns us more particularly here, it will suffice to say that, in the correspondence of triangular numbers and square numbers, the former must be related to a higher domain than the latter, whence one may infer that, in Pythagorean symbolism, the Tetraktys must have had a superior role to that of the square of four; and, in fact, all that is known of it appears to indicate that this was indeed really so.

Now, there is something else more singular, and which, although referring to a different traditional form, can certainly not be regarded as a simple “coincidence”: the two numbers 10 and 16, contained respectively in the triangle and in the square, have for their sum 26; now this number 26 is the total numerical value of the letters forming the Hebrew Tetragrammaton. Moreover, 10 is the value of the first letter, and 16 is that of the ensemble of the three other letters; this division of the Tetragrammaton is perfectly normal, and the correspondence of its two parts is again very significant: the Tetraktys is thus identified with the first letter in the triangle, while the remainder of the Tetragrammaton

is inscribed in the square placed beneath it.

On the other hand, the triangle and the square both contain four lines of points; it is to be noted, although this in sum has only a secondary importance, and only in order once again to mark the concordances of different traditional sciences, that the four lines of points are found again in the figures of geomancy, figures which moreover, by the quaternary combinations of 1 and 2, are sixteen in number; and geomancy, as its name indicates, is in special relation with the earth, which, according to Far-Eastern tradition, is symbolized by the square form.

Finally, if one considers the solid forms corresponding, in three-dimensional geometry, to the plane figures in question, to the square corresponds a cube, and to the triangle a quadrangular pyramid having for its base the upper face of this cube; the ensemble forms what Masonic symbolism designates as the “pointed cubic stone”, which, in Hermetic interpretation, is regarded as a figure of the “philosophers’ stone”. There are still, with regard to this last symbol, other remarks to be made; but, as they no longer have any relation to the question of the Tetraktys, it will be preferable to consider them separately in another article